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Northampton residents criticize stormwater fee proposal at hearing

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NORTHAMPTON — A proposed system to charge property owners a stormwater fee drew criticism and alternative suggestions from residents during a public hearing at JFK Middle School on Wednesday.

With the exception of city officials who sometimes spoke in support of the proposal, all the comments during the two-hour hearing questioned the affordability or fairness of the single flat fee that owners of residential properties would pay, estimated to be about \$123 annually. About 60 residents attended.

City officials say the proposed fee is necessary to raise about \$2.2 million annually for a stormwater and flood control enterprise fund so the Department of Public Works can perform regular maintenance of and required capital improvements to the city's stormwater and flood control systems. Currently, the department relies on money from the city's general operating budget.

Earlier this summer, a task force recommended two possible fee structures. The one the Board of Public Works favors would charge a single rate to all residential properties housing up to three families, and would calculate the fees for commercial, nonprofit and other large properties on the basis of size and the amount of impervious surface.

The other proposal would use the same system for commercial and large properties but would charge residents on a tiered basis according to property size.

At the hearing, Board of Public Works Chairman Terry Culhane assured residents that their comments and suggestions would be taken into consideration before the board makes an official recommendation to the City Council in the coming weeks.

Robert Nagle, of 3 Madison Ave., said he believes the proposal is unfair, and called the fee just another tax.

"I think this tax is wrong," he said. "I think it will continue to drive the middle class out of the city."

Sissie Horrigan of 89 Straw Ave., Florence, said she supports the tiered system, arguing that compared to wealthier residents with big homes and properties, she not only has less runoff, but also is less able to afford the bill.

"I am the only income for my property," she said. "We've got a number of elderly people who are moving out of the city because they can't afford to stay. And we just passed the override, which is going to increase our taxes every year."

Danielle Powers of 37 Stoddard St. also said the amount of runoff from surfaces such as roofs and driveways should be the measure of how much a homeowners should pay.

"I look around my neighborhood and I have a single, small driveway and a smaller house, and everyone else can fit six vehicles in their driveways," she said. "I can't afford it, I just can't afford it."

Many residents inquired about possible exemptions and credits. Culhane said the board is considering credits or exemptions for low-income residents, homeowners who reduce runoff, and for properties with permanent restrictions limiting their use, among other things. The maximum bill for land with an agricultural or conservation restriction would be capped so the biggest possible bill for open land would be about \$100.

Alison Kriviskey, president of the Ice Pond Homeowners Association, said residents in homeowners associations should be considered for exemptions because the city already requires them to pay for stormwater maintenance.

Kriviskey, of 23 Ice Pond Drive, said that through their annual dues to the association, residents there pay a collective \$2,400 each year to keep up the stormwater system in their neighborhood. "If you add \$123 on top of our annual dues, our 24 families are spending a great deal toward stormwater management," she said.

Culhane said figuring out all the exemptions would be a long, thorough process. "I view the exemption and credit system as an ongoing thing," Culhane said. "It will be a moving target."

Emory Ford of 364 Spring St., a member of the task force, took issue with the Board of Public Works' proposal. He argued that exemptions for properties with agricultural and conservation restrictions do not make sense.

"All properties produce runoff," he said. "After we have a substantial rainstorm and the ground is saturated, if it continues to rain, you will get runoff off of any property in the city."

Ford also said that since the city has not figured out what exemptions and credits would be allowed, the estimate for what most taxpayers would pay is inaccurate. "I think taxpayers will have a substantial surprise when the exemptions kick in and they get the bill," he said.

Christopher Hellman, a Board of Public Works member who also served on the task force, conceded that picking the best fee system was just one of the many issues task force members disagreed on. "None of us were happy with any of the discussions because we saw the merits of both sides," he said.

He encouraged residents worried about being able to pay the bill to speak up before the proposal is finalized.

"The last thing we want to do is see a new fee that's going to force people from our neighborhood to make a financial decision about their future in this community," he said. "So if you feel strongly about that one, I urge you to talk to your elected officials about it."

After receiving the board's recommendation in the next few weeks, the City Council will have the final word on the fee structure. If approved, bills would likely be sent out starting July 1, 2014.

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